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Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* as Divine Comedy

Bryan A. Bardine

Comedy has always been more difficult to define and pin down than tragedy.* Part of the difficulty may be that comedy is, by its very nature, more protean than tragedy: comedy often takes delight in breaking the rules. Moreover, tragedy has been so memorably described in *The Poetics* that Aristotle may have unintentionally molded the shape of tragedy through the ages. There are different kinds of tragedy, to be sure, but they are usually variations of a similar theme and form. Perhaps because Aristotle's treatise on comedy has been lost, comedy was left free to develop in numerous ways. In any event, comedy can range from the slapstick to the sublime, from the misadventures of Don Quixote to the mysticism of Dante.

The fact that Dante named his poem the *Commedia* indicates that comedy ranges far beyond the narrow confines of "funny" material that most people think of as comic. Challenging this popular notion of comedy as a narrow, second-class art form are the writings of Northrop Frye, Suzanne Langer, and others. Works like *Anatomy of Criticism* and *Feeling and Form* have explored the broad range of comedy and have greatly extended our critical understanding of comedy. Today, few informed readers balk at the suggestion that *The Odyssey* is as much a comic work as *The Odd Couple*.

Few critics, however, have explored in great detail the sublime end of the comic spectrum. This is partly due to the idea Eugene R. August suggests in his article "The Only Happy Ending: Divine Comedies in Western Literature," that "Divine comedies frequently have been disparaged for not being 'true' tragedies, or they have been distorted to fit some accepted tragic pattern" (86). August attempts to show that divine comedy is an individual category and has certain dominant characteristics that differentiate it from both comedy and tragedy. Throughout the article August discusses the tenets of divine comedy and gives examples from western literature to support his belief. One work that he does not consider is Hermann Hesse's classic novel *Siddhartha*. *Siddhartha's* membership in this divine comic "club" is obvious and essential because the novel contains each of August's eight characteristics of divine comedy.

* I would like to gratefully acknowledge the help of Dr. Eugene August in the completion of this manuscript. His insights were invaluable.

Divine comedies, according to August, “project their own non-tragic vision of the human condition” (85). This “non-tragic vision,” while separating divine comedies from tragedies has failed to gain a serious critical following because too many scholars still believe that a tragic conclusion is the highest form of art. The comic aspect of divine comedy, while in part referring to humor, still predominantly refers to the positive conclusion of the story. Also, August says that the “idea that comedies can also possess high seriousness, can depict humanity above the average, can mediate a worthy vision of reality is still foreign to many minds” (87). *Siddhartha*, while displaying some humorous aspects, relies mainly on these more serious tenets.

Concurrently, divine comedy refers to the usual connection between the human and the supernatural at the conclusion of the literature. It may also show characters coming to a greater understanding of themselves by a spiritual transformation that comes through personal experience. In any case, the divine comic heroes, while struggling and experiencing some tragedy, rebound and strengthen themselves from some newly found knowledge—normally attained through an intervention with some supernatural or otherworldly force.

August’s first characteristic for divine comedy is that it “possesses the traditional comic action which moves from bad fortune to good fortune, from calamity to harmony” (91). Within *Siddhartha*’s plot this characteristic exists as well. Throughout the novel many of Siddhartha’s problems and calamities are within himself; he is always searching for spiritual perfection and continuous growth. When his soul is not at peace, he experiences pain and suffering, and it is at these times that he searches for his true voice. This happens several times during the novel. The first occasion on which Siddhartha experiences this type of bad fortune is at the outset of the plot when he realizes he is unhappy. The narrator says:

Siddhartha had begun to feel the seeds of discontent within him. He had begun to feel that the love of his father and mother, and also the love of his friend Govinda, would not always make him happy, give him peace, satisfy and suffice him . . . his intellect was not satisfied, his soul was not at peace, his heart was not still. (5)

Clearly, Siddhartha is at a crossroads in his young life. He wants to find the source of Atman, which is the innermost essence of an individual, and he has realized that his parents’ and religious teaching have done as much as possible to help him reach this goal. They just are not enough. He decides to become an ascetic monk so he can (he thinks) move closer to finding Atman. When he joins the Samanas he believes that his troubles will end, and the strict self-denial that the Samanas practice teaches him a great deal, but again he longs to learn more and decides to leave the monks after three years.

As Siddhartha is leaving he speaks to Gotama, the “Illustrious One,” and tells him the problem he is having with the great one’s teaching:

But there is one thing that this clear, worthy instruction does not contain; it does not contain the secret of what the Illustrious One himself experienced— . . . That is why I am going away—not to seek another and better doctrine, for I

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know there is none, but to leave all doctrines and teachers
and to reach my goal alone—or die. (34)

Again, Siddhartha experiences a difficult time, uncertain about the future, but knowing the importance of discovering the Inner Self. He feels lost, and a sense of “icy despair” sweeps over him after he leaves the grove of the Illustrious One. He is alone, but there is still a strong feeling of independence in him—a hope and knowledge that his decision is the right one. This hope carries him through other difficult times. He will experience other setbacks and calamities in his search for the Atman, but each time Siddhartha experiences a harmony within himself which enables him to move closer to his final goal. This feeling of despair in Siddhartha displays part of the misfortune that August discusses in his first characteristic.

The second characteristic that August sees in divine comedies is that “the opening calamity of a divine comedy always involves an estrangement between the human and the divine; the final harmony always involves their joyous reconciliation” (91). In *Siddhartha* much of the estrangement between the human and divine occurs within Siddhartha himself; he demonstrates this estrangement through his unhappiness and lack of contentment. At the beginning of the novel before he decides to become an ascetic he questions his religious beliefs and wonders if his search for Atman is moving along the right path:

And where was Atman to be found, where did he dwell,
where did his eternal heart beat, if not within the Self, in the
innermost, in the eternal which each person carried within
him? But where was this Self, this innermost? . . . Nobody
showed the way, nobody knew it—neither his father, nor
the teachers and wise men, nor the holy songs. (6)

Soon, Siddhartha decides he must leave his present life to search for Atman through the ascetic method of self-denial and pain. With this decision he is surrendering his past associations with his family and his teachers and giving up the way of living he had grown up with. Further, with this decision he severs himself from much of the religious tradition that he has grown up with—the sacrificing, the cleansing baths, and the praying to the gods. He chooses to do this, to separate himself from his former religious life, because as he says, “One must find the source [of Atman] within one’s own Self, one must possess it. Everything else was seeking—a detour, error” (7). So, this separation from the religious life of his youth is done with the belief that by doing so he will find Atman—the innermost peace.

Although Siddhartha rejects his earlier religious beliefs, he seems to become one with the All, the Atman, in Govinda’s vision of his smiling “mask” at the end of the novel. This movement from a naive spirituality to an informed one marks a reconciliation between the human and divine because by understanding the Self more completely Siddhartha is able to understand God more completely as well. The narrator of the novel gives the reader a glimpse of Siddhartha’s increased understanding of Self when he says:

Within Siddhartha there slowly grew and ripened the
knowledge of what wisdom really was and the goal of his
long seeking. It was nothing but a preparation of the soul,

a capacity, a secret art of thinking, feeling and breathing thoughts of unity at every moment of life . . . knowledge of the eternal perfection of the world, and unity. (131)

The idea of “eternal perfection” reminds the reader of divine understanding that can be within a person such as Siddhartha who has devoted himself to finding ultimate wisdom. Furthermore, “eternal perfection” embraces the belief that both God and the true Self of man are everlasting.

August’s third tenet of the divine comic mode is that it arouses, then purges feelings of fear and pity, “but it achieves its own effect by a reversal which transforms them into relief and joy” (93). Siddhartha experiences these four emotions at various times during the novel. At the outset of the story he is confused and wondering whether his life’s path is correct—he is afraid that his life thus far has not accomplished anything. The narrator tells the reader,

But Siddhartha himself was not happy . . . there was yet no joy in his own heart. Dreams and restless thoughts came flowing to him from the river, from the twinkling stars at night, from the sun’s melting rays. Dreams and restlessness of the soul came to him. . . . (5)

Clearly, Siddhartha is thinking about his life and trying to decide what to do next. Does he stay in his village to become a great leader for his people and be unsatisfied with his inner Self? Or should he move on and give up the only life he has known to find this inner Self? He chooses the latter and the rest of his life is an on again-off again search for the Atman. Finally, however, he comes to a great understanding of life and teaching and knowledge through his relationship with Vasudeva and the river.

As in some other divine comedies, Siddhartha does not experience an outward show of joy or relief, but rather his “joy and relief” are displayed through an inner peace and knowledge that he has come to gain through his life and search for the Self:

From that hour Siddhartha ceased to fight against his destiny. There shone in his face the serenity of knowledge, of one who is no longer confronted with conflict of desires, who has found salvation, who is in harmony with the stream of events, with the stream of life, full of sympathy and compassion, surrendering himself to the stream, belonging to the unity of all things. (136)

Siddhartha, after gaining this knowledge and wisdom, has come to a clear understanding of life. He is joyful in the sense that he is finally in harmony with life and with his inner Self, but this joyfulness is expressed more in his harmony with life and his sympathetic and compassionate attitude. Rather than an outward display of emotion, Siddhartha’s purging of fear has come through his heightened understanding and experience of life.

August’s fourth characteristic of divine comedy is that “the divine comic hero is initially marked as being unfortunate, as enduring exile or some other adversity . . . divine comedy presents its hero as a flawed or unfortunate person who achieves greatness. . . . the divine comic hero rises to an eminence that is truly

godlike" (94). The first part of this characteristic exists throughout *Siddhartha* in the numerous trials that Siddhartha experiences during his quest of discovery for the Atman. Each time he decides to change the path his life takes is a new lesson in some type of adversity. He must deal with the loss of family, friends, and youthful religious belief when he joins the Samanas; he must endure being without Govinda and teachings of any kind to guide him upon leaving the Samanas. Further, he must live without his money, good food, nice clothes, and women when he leaves the town to put his life back in order, and he must give up his constant seeking in order to find his true destiny when he becomes a ferryman and lives with Vasudeva.

Siddhartha believes that he is flawed and incomplete because he cannot find his inner Self. He can never be a complete person in his own mind until he can be at one with the Atman. The greatness that he achieves is his ability to understand not only himself but also the world around him. He is able to take in the best part of each of the different sections of his life, and finally, when he lives on the river with Vasudeva his knowledge and his searching are complete when he listens to the river. In doing so he hears all the voices in his past, and he sees the goals he has accomplished in his life. It is as if the river has tied together his life more clearly so he can understand it better. Through this he comes to a better understanding of the world:

They [voices of the river] were all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life.
(135-36)

When Siddhartha is able to hear all of these voices together he is listening to Om—perfection. That is when he achieves the greatness in his life. Further, it is because so few people in the world are able to do this—Siddhartha knew of only two: Gotama and Vasudeva—that it is a godlike quality. Having this knowledge makes Siddhartha a great sage and revered elder to all of humankind. This connection with the gods and within himself enables Siddhartha to achieve a divine comic greatness that few other characters in literature approach.

The fifth characteristic of divine comedy that August defines is that the "principal strength of divine comic heroes is a humbled awareness of their human limitations. Paradoxically, by recognizing their humanity, divine comic heroes achieve godlikeness" (94). This tenet refers to Walter Kaufman's idea of humbition (94). The word is a "fusion of humility and ambition, a quality 'which involves a sense of one's limitations, accompanied by the aspiration to rise to a higher level of being'" (94). Siddhartha shows this combination at different times during the novel. For instance, even at the conclusion of the story when he is talking to Govinda he realizes he is not perfect. He says, "Listen, my friend! I am a sinner and you are a sinner" . . . (143). Clearly, Siddhartha realizes that he is not a completely virtuous individual, but rather he sins and has gone against the laws of life. At the end, Govinda sees that when Siddhartha smiled, "the Perfect One" has smiled. Siddhartha becomes truly godlike in Govinda's final vision of him. Further, as Ernst Rose comments in his book *Faith from the Abyss*,

Siddhartha's experience of mystic union does not lead to spiritual aloofness, for man can never wholly divest himself of the earth, he is never 'wholly saint, nor is he ever wholly sinner.' Siddhartha's way leads to humble, Christian charity. In all his awareness of the infinite realm of God and the universe, he remains a simple ferryman and farmer. (72)

Rose correctly sees the correlation between Siddhartha's earthly life and his growing spiritual union with God. Even though, by the end of the novel, Siddhartha has come to a clear understanding of his inner Self along with God's role in his life, he has not attempted to make himself better than the other people he sees in life. He lives a simple, devout life.

His ambition is demonstrated throughout the novel whenever he decides to change the path of his life. Each time he does this it is for one purpose: to gain a better understanding of his inner Self. The continuous transformations that he puts himself through enable him to reach his ultimate goal, and these transformations show the ambition and drive that motivates Siddhartha to reach his goal. This combination of humility and ambition enables Siddhartha to be considered in much the same way as his mentor Vasudeva is by Siddhartha himself. As Siddhartha speaks to Vasudeva he sees the Godlike qualities in him. The narrator says:

As he went on talking and confessing, Siddhartha felt more and more that this was no longer Vasudeva, no longer a man who was listening to him. He felt that this motionless listener was absorbing his confession as a tree absorbs the rain, that this motionless man was the river itself, that he was God Himself, that he was eternity itself. (133)

Vasudeva is at complete peace within himself, and Siddhartha is trying to attain this oneness. By confessing to Vasudeva, Siddhartha is not only showing his humility, but also he is moving closer to becoming like Vasudeva. Finally, at the conclusion of the novel he reaches this deified state when Govinda refers to him as the one "whom many considered to be a sage" (139). Also, Siddhartha's Godlike qualities surface as he instructs Govinda on how to become one with the inner Self. Siddhartha's instruction reminds the reader of Christ speaking to and teaching his apostles. Even though this similarity seems odd in a book primarily about Eastern religion and thought, it should be remembered that the author wrote the novel coming from a predominantly Western religious tradition.

August's sixth characteristic of divine comedy is that the "divine comic hero is marked by an ability to suffer, to endure some form of death, and to be reborn" (95). Siddhartha easily moves through this transformation during the novel. As noted earlier, he suffers because he cannot find the Atman in the beginning of the novel. As the story progresses, his suffering becomes greater and more intense while he lives in the town. He becomes dependent on gambling, money, and greed.

And whenever he awakened from this hateful spell, when he saw his face reflected . . . grown older and uglier, whenever shame and nausea overtook him, he fled again . . .

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fled in confusion to passion, to wine, and from there back again to the urge for acquiring and hoarding wealth. He wore himself out in this senseless cycle, became old and sick. (80)

His suffering and destructive lifestyle are evident here. It is not until he finally leaves the town that he nearly experiences death.

He wants his suffering and decadent lifestyle to come to an end. The narrator explains that Siddhartha “wished passionately for oblivion, to be at rest, to be dead” (87). He nearly drowns himself until the Om, his old inner voice which had faded away during his materialistic life in town, resurfaces and awakens his ambition for life. He brings himself out of the water after hearing the Om and sleeps; upon rising a change has taken place:

Never had a sleep so refreshed him, so renewed him, so rejuvenated him! Perhaps he had really died, perhaps he had been drowned and was reborn in another form. . . . But this Siddhartha was somewhat changed, renewed. (91)

This rebirth and change continues in Siddhartha for the remainder of the novel. Never again does he lose touch with his inner voice, and his ambition and striving that were once stifled by greed and lust are never weakened again.

The seventh characteristic that August discusses is that “Although humorous elements may exist in divine comedy (just as they may exist in tragedy), the dominant tone of divine comedy is a serious one, as in tragedy” (96). Throughout *Siddhartha* the mood is predominantly serious and very calm. George Wallis Field says in his biography of Hermann Hesse that “The mood evoked by *Siddhartha* is that of serenity, of a poetic, exalted world on a higher plane” (82). Field’s explanation of the tone of the novel gives it a serious and relaxed feeling. Further, by discussing the tone in terms of an “exalted world on a higher plane” Field is connecting the story and the actions of Siddhartha with the divine. Clearly, this description moves the book closer to divine comic consideration. Actually, the tone of the novel is very consistent. Rarely, if ever, is the mood anything but serene and calm. It is very difficult to find many humorous actions in the story.

The final characteristic that August sees in most divine comedies is that they normally have a mentor/guide who possesses some wisdom that the hero lacks. The mentor assists the hero in the journey by imparting knowledge to the hero that he did not have before meeting the mentor. Siddhartha does not have one guide, as can be seen in other divine comedies, but rather he has several. His mentor through his early years is his father and the Brahmin teachings that he grew up with. Next, he is guided by his Samana monks and their beliefs, and he then listens to what Gotama spoke to him about and carries that with him on his journey. Kamala taught him about sensual love and lust, while Kamaswami informed him about the business world and what he needs to survive in the city. Finally, and most importantly, he learned from Vasudeva the art of listening to the river; from the river he was ultimately able to get in touch with his inner Self—his own perfection. Obviously, Siddhartha learned from each of the aforementioned guides, but he was able to use his acquired knowledge from each to move in some way closer to his goal.

The idea of a divine comic category of literature is a new and still developing thought. Unfortunately, not many critics and scholars have paid much attention to this type of literature. To be sure, it has its own characteristics which distinguish it from both comedy and tragedy. Although it is closely related to each genre of literature, it is still unique in its structure and characteristics. Hermann Hesse's classic journey of discovery, *Siddhartha*, definitely deserves membership into the association of various masterpieces of western literature that August discusses in his article "The Only Happy Ending: Divine Comedies in Western Literature." It maintains each of the tenets that August discusses, and in so doing rates as one of the clearest examples of divine comedy yet written.

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